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ABSTRACT

The problem of evaluating instructional materials in foreign language courses in terms of educational relevance is examined in this survey of a third-semester, college, Spanish class. Students were given reading materials in the social sciences in lieu of the more traditional literary selections and asked to evaluate them through an attitudinal questionnaire. Results indicate greater student interest in the social science readings than in material on Hispanic culture. (RL)

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"Student Reactions to Materials Relating to the Social Sciences in a Third Semester College Spanish Class"

The increasing unpopularity of the foreign language requirement on campuses throughout the nation is a well known fact to any language teacher. The most frequent complaints lodged against language study are that it is irrelevant, horrendous and unhelpful. These feelings have been amply demonstrated at the University of Colorado in a student questionnaire which was administered during the Spring semester of 1968. Of particular interest are the answers to the following two questions: (1) Are the language courses irrelevant to most students' line of study? and (2) Does the language requirement permit you to read work done by foreigners in your major field? Of 829 student responses to the first question 67% were "Yes", while 56% of the 819 responses to the second question were "No".

Since recent enrollment patterns indicate an increasing interest in the social sciences, the Department of Spanish and Portuguese of the University of Colorado instituted in the Spring of 1971, a special

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1

section of third semester Spanish with readings in the social sciences The purposes of this innovation were to: (1) make language study more relevant to most students' line of study. and (2) acquaint students with the jargon of the social scientist with the hope that this knowledge would permit them to read published contributions in Spanish in this area. Prior to registration for the Spring semester a letter was sent out to all social science departments on campus informing them of the creation of this section and requesting that they counsel their students to enroll in it. The Teaching Associate chosen to teach the course was Michael Abel Fernández, a native speaker of Spanish with an undergraduate major in history.

Course Description

Students taking third semester Spanish at the University of Colorado cover the last six chapters of the Lado-Blansitt text, Contemporary Spanish. Although the format of this text is highly audio-lingual, each of the 24 units contains a reading selection pertaining to Hispanic culture of approximately 600 words in length. It was decided that in the special section students would not be responsible for the reading selection in the book. Instead the teacher would bring in mimeographed selections taken from books, magazines and professional journals in Spanish which could be found in the university library. The readings chosen included the following: (1) an article on voodoo in Haiti, (2) a survey of Latin-American customs, (3) a warning to the world about American imperi-

alism, (4) a discussion of the population explosion in Latin-America, (5) a commentary on the Allende government in Chile, and (6) a review of the situation in the Middle East. Each reading selection was approximately 900 words in length.

Method

The method used for teaching the selections was the following. The teacher assigned the students to read all or a portion of the selection for homework as extensive reading. New words were singled out by the teacher on a mimeographed sheet and defined via either the use of synonyms, antonyms or English translations. The teacher began the next class by giving a lecture in Spanish on the topic covered in the reading. The lecture was a personal viewpoint of the subject and was not meant to be a restatement or a resume of the material the students had read. Following this, the teacher asked students questions on the content of the selection they had read. These questions were often very simple and usually consisted of the teacher's taking a statement and rephrasing it into a question. At all times students were encouraged to give their personal opinion of the subject being discussed. Such opinions given in English were accepted although not encouraged. Other questions asked the students included True-False questions and definitions of terms such as "What is the infrastructure of a country?" Finally, similar questions were given the students on their tests.

The Questionnaire

In order to assess the value of these readings, a questionnaire was developed which required the students to make an affective evaluation of a Likert scale. Although fifteen of the sixteen students taking the course completed the questionnaire, all the students did not answer all the questions. The results of the evaluation were as follows.

On Question I, which dealt with the students' major or intended major, the tallied responses were: Social Science - 2, Humanities - 3, Natural Science - 6, Education - 1, Undecided - 2. From this data it appears that efforts to inform Social Science majors about the special section failed. Student enrollment patterns were similar to those of any other section of third semester Spanish. Therefore the results of the questionnaire can be considered indicative of the effect such readings might have were they adopted on a more wide-spread basis.

Question II asked for an opinion of the readings used in the course. The results, indicate that the modal student was only moderately stimulated by these readings.

TABLE I

STUDENTS' EVALUATION OF SOCIAL SCIENCE READINGS

1. I like them very much.	(1)
2. I like them quite a bit.	(2)
3. I like them moderately well.	(10)
4. I like them very little.	(2)
5. I do not like them at all.	(0)

Course Evaluation

I. What is your major or intended major?

1. Social Science
2. Humanities
3. Natural Science
4. Education
5. Engineering
6. Other - Please state
7. Undecided

II. As you are probably aware, this class has been reading selections in the Social Sciences, rather than selections on Hispanic culture. What is your opinion of these readings?

1. I like them very much.
2. I like them quite a bit.
3. I like them moderately well.
4. I like them very little.
5. I do not like them at all.

III. How would you compare the readings you have had in this class to the readings in Hispanic culture you have had previously?

1. I find readings in the social sciences more enjoyable.
2. I find readings in Hispanic culture more enjoyable.
3. No particular preference.

IV. Do you think that after having acquired some skill at reading this type of material, in Spanish, you will use this skill in the future in the preparation of term papers?

1. I certainly will.
2. I probably will.
3. Not sure
4. I doubt that I ever will.
5. I am certain that I never will.

V. Do you plan to take Spanish 212?

1. Yes. 2. No.

VI. If you answered "No", and a special section of Spanish 212 with similar readings were set up, would you then try to enroll in it?

1. Yes 2. NO

VII. If you answered "Yes" to Question V., would you prefer readings in Hispanic culture or the social sciences?

1. I would prefer readings in Hispanic Culture.
2. I would prefer readings in Social Sciences.
3. No preference

VIII. Which reading selection did you like most?

IX. Which reading selection did you like least?

X. The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the value of the readings used in this section. Do you think the evaluation has accomplished its objective?

1. Yes
2. No--If not, how can this evaluation be improved? (write your answer in the space below)

In Question III the students compared the readings on Hispanic culture previously experienced with the substitute readings presented to their section. To this question seven students replied that they found the social science readings more enjoyable, one student said that he found the readings in Hispanic culture more enjoyable, and six students stated no particular preference. Thus, it would seem that the introduction of these readings was a worthwhile addition to the reading component of the course.

Question IV is particularly interesting in that it relates to one of the more commonly mentioned justifications for the language requirement. To this question three students replied that they probably will, three said that they were not sure, and nine said that they doubted they ever would. Unfortunately, or fortunately, according to the reader's own personal bias, these results can have no validity since only two of the students responding were social science majors. It would seem however, that given the nature of the question, the positive responses of three of the students would be encouraging to proponents of the language requirement.

In responding to Question V four students replied that they planned to enroll for a fourth semester of Spanish, while ten students said they would not.

Question VI read as follows: "If you answered "No," to question V and a special section of Spanish 212 (fourth semester) with similar readings were set up, would you try to enroll in it?" Eleven students

responded "No" to this question. This, due to a lack of attention on the part of someone, was one more response than the number who had originally responded "No."

The results of Questions VII are just as anomolous. Here, one student who answered "Yes" to question V, said that he would prefer readings in the social sciences, while four students stated no particular preference. Again, interpretation is hampered by the fact that only four students answered "Yes" to question V. It does, however, seem evident that the implementation of a social science section in the fourth semester would not significantly increase the number of students at that level.

The results of questions VIII and IX are also difficult to interpret. The only thing that can be shown with certainty is the considerable popularity of the article on the population explosion, which received the votes of six students as the most liked. Other articles mentioned were the one on Latin-American customs, which received one vote for most liked and one vote for least liked, and the one on Voodoo in Haiti which received five votes for most liked and three vote for least liked. The responses to the article on American imperialism are interesting. In this case one student described as most liked, while for students described it as least liked. The author does not feel that this should be considered a mandate for deleting this article in future courses. Contrarily, I believe it sould be used in the future since the teacher described

it as "the one which caused the greatest reaction." The article itself was written in a very anti-American fashion and for this reason it is believed that the negative responses of students can be considered an evaluation of the author's objectivity. None of the other articles were mentioned by students.

Question X asked whether or not the questionnaire had actually assessed the value of the readings used in the course. Here, eleven students indicated that it had.

The questionnaire requested that those students who answered "No", offer a suggestion as to how the evaluation could be improved. Only two suggestions were useful. One of them requested a question on the method of presentation of the readings, and another requested a question regarding the sufficiency of the amount of time allotted to cover each reading. I feel that such questions should not be included in the questionnaire since they are an evaluation of the instructor's methodology, rather than an evaluation of the readings themselves. Methodology will vary from instructor to instructor, even with close articulation and supervision and therefore is not relevant to the study. The third suggestion simply stated: "Evaluations can never be improved." and thus can not be interpreted.

Conclusions

Although this study began as an attempt to make language study more relevant to the interests of social science majors, enrollment patterns made it necessary to abandon this topic. It was therefore

decided to continunue the study in an attempt to ascertain the effect of readings in the social sciences on a section filled by random registration. The results indicate that students generally prefer readings in the social sciences to readings in Hispanic culture. Therefore, based on this information, it would seem reasonable that the study be replicated, and if similar results are obtained, careful consideration be given to the advantages and disadvantages of such readings in all sections of third semester Spanish.

Student responses to questions VI and VII indicate that installing a similar section at the fourth semester level would not noticeably increase the number of students choosing to take this optional course.

Finally, it should be cautioned that the responses to question II indicate that the use of such readings is far from being a panacea capable of alleviating the complaints about language courses. At best, the results of this study only indicate that students find readings of this type to be more injoyable.